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ABSTRACT

While southern States are attempting to provide academic and job training for high school dropouts whose earnings are below poverty level, a more effective solution would be to encourage high school completion and to assure the mastery of skills. Educational efforts are, therefore, now being focused on programs in elementary schools with the hope that benefits of the programs will be sustained at higher levels. Students presently attending secondary school take exit examinations in basic skills, but failure in these exams may encourage dropping out. Six suggestions are offered: (1) commitment to reform as an ongoing process; (2) mobilization of diverse agencies to work with students; (3) creation of alternative education programs; (4) development of comprehensive employability training; (5) initiation of clearly defined curriculum sequences which prepare students for employment or further study; and (6) special encouragement for black youths to complete high school and to enroll in post-secondary training or study. (VM)

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SCHOOL DROPOUTS, UNDER EDUCATED YOUTH, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH

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Testimony of M. Hayes Mizell before the U. S. House of Representatives' Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families. Presented on April 24, 1987 at the Committee's field hearing in Nashville, Tennessee.

Talking about the futures of under educated and under served youth in the South is not easy for many people because they believe that drawing attention to the problem threatens the region's ability to attract new industry and other forms of investment. But it has only been since the South has been willing to face its problems that it has experienced new heights of political leadership, unprecedented improvements in public education, and economic growth. The current optimism in this region is justified because men and women in leadership positions --from the classroom to the board room--are working hard to expand opportunities for human and economic development. More people recognize the need for change, and they are more willing to permit, finance, and participate in the experimentation necessary to find more effective ways of developing our people, and consequently our region.

Because this is such an exciting time for the South it is tempting to forget that our region is still in a state of transition. Only twenty years ago did we finally begin to dismantle the barriers created by legally mandated racial segregation. Only ten years ago did we feel we had completed the desegregation process and could begin to turn our energies and financial resources to new challenges. And it has only been within the past five years that many Southern states have initiated education reform programs that have set new directions for the nation as well as the region.

But in spite of the South's achievements we cannot expect the legacies of our past to conveniently disappear. As late as 1965 in South Carolina 60 percent (49,243) of the youth (59% of

them Black) who started the first grade in 1953 did not graduate twelve years later. These young people are now in their late thirties to mid-forties. They have been employed with inadequate education and it is reasonable to expect that many of them have lived at or near the poverty level. And with less than a high school education they have raised a new generation of South Carolinians, most of whom are now in their twenties. We do not know how many of these children did not complete the twelfth grade school, but we do know that thus far during the 1980s, State Department of Education officials have identified 79,304 students as dropouts. While our state's dropout data are not without their flaws, if these figures are even half correct they indicate there are large numbers of adults and youth who do not have the education or skills to generate family incomes above the poverty level. These trends over past decades explain why in 1985 there were 912,640 adults in South Carolina with less than a high school diploma. Experience tells us that these data are not unique to South Carolina.

Our state, like most other Southern states, is working to address the needs of this under served population. In 1985 nearly 70,000 adults were enrolled in 592 adult education centers, and 6,947 adults received a high school diploma or GED high school equivalency. Also in 1985 the state's technical education system provided developmental education services to 10,720 persons eighteen years or older with academic skills at the sixth grade level, or less. In addition, academic and job training assistance is also provided under the Jobs Training

Partnership Act, the State Board for Comprehensive and Technical Education, and the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. But it is no secret that it is more expensive, and less effective, to re-educate than it is to educate in the first instance, and to re-train than it is to train the first time around.

The challenge facing the South is like the aftermath of a great flood caused by a long and steady downpour of racial discrimination, inadequate education, limited employment opportunities, and low wages. For decades the mass of Southerners could only tread water, and over the years many people grew weary and fell victim to the swirling waters. But now the rains have diminished in their intensity. In some places there are even patches of sunshine in the sky, and people near the high ground have started to rebuild. The people in the low lying areas are still knee-deep in water but they are glad the rains seem to be ending. They see the waters slowly receding and they are preparing for the future. Even though there is a lot of work to be done the promise of better weather has been so long delayed that now there is a mood of celebration in the air. Still, the celebration cannot really begin until the rain stops and the earth is dry.

In this analogy the continuing "rain" represents the school-age youth who drop out of school, who do not receive a high school diploma, or who graduate from high school but still cannot read, compute, or write at a level that will enable them to obtain good jobs. These are the displaced workers of the future, the people who will lack the generic skills necessary to adapt to the changing demands of the labor market. Unless we act

now to stop this "rain", our region's potential for continued economic growth may be jeopardized. As the nation's labor pool of available entry-level employees diminishes over the next ten years our region may not be able to compete with other states where a higher proportion of available workers will be able to apply their mastery of basic skills.

Significant action is being taken in some states. As a result of South Carolina's education reform initiative in 1984 this year we are spending $55 million in State funds to provide compensatory and remedial education programs to approximately 245,000 students who do not meet our state's basic skills standards. We are spending $8.6 million in State funds to prepare about 7,000 four-year olds who are at significant risk of serious learning problems when they enter elementary school. And last school year of the more than 12,000 vocational students available for job placement, nearly 80% were either employed in areas related to their training, or they were employed or studying in related areas in the military or post-secondary education. All this is in addition to the fact that nearly all of the state's pre-schoolers are in a kindergarten program, that for the past two years South Carolina has had the nation's highest rate of average daily student attendance, and that for the past several years there have been more and more students moving out of the bottom achievement quartiles on the national normative distribution of performance on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills.

Like other Southern states South Carolina is betting its future on educational programs for young children. We hope that a combination of early intervention, higher academic standards, strict accountability for improved performance, incentives, and the improved preparation and compensation of teachers will result in raising students' achievement levels. The early results are promising, but it remains to be seen whether the impressive gains of elementary school children can be sustained as they move through middle and high school. By the mid-1990s we should know how well we have succeeded in educating the generation of young people who entered school in 1985.

Unfortunately, we do not have the luxury of focusing only on the work force of the year 2000 and beyond. There is a more immediate problem. This year there are approximately 51,000 students in the ninth grade. If present trends continue only 35,700 of these students will enter the twelfth grade. Unless we act to prevent it, about 55% of the 15,300 who withdraw from school will either drop out or be expelled, and we will assume that the remaining students have moved but because of flaws in our data collection system we will not really know what happened to them. Of the students who make it to the twelfth grade, as many as 9,000 of them may perform at a level comparable to the nation's poorest readers at that grade level.

However, in South Carolina the Class of 1990 will confront a new circumstance unlike that faced by any preceding class. In the spring of 1988, near the end of tenth grade, this class will take an exit exam which will be the culmination of the state's Basic Skills Assessment Program tests first administered

within two weeks after a child enters the first grade grade and thereafter in grades one, two, three, six, and eight.

The exit exam includes separate untimed tests, administered on separate days, for reading, mathematics and writing. A student must pass all three sections of the exam in order to receive a high school diploma. It should be emphasized that when a student fails any portion of the exit exam state law requires the student to receive remediation in that subject. The law also provides that a student will have three additional chances to retake the portion of the exam that he/she failed.

No one can predict how the Class of 1990 will perform when it takes the test in the spring of 1988. Students who will take the exit exam were in the eighth grade last year. At that time they took the state's basic skills test for the eighth grade. The results were not encouraging. Forty-four percent (8,143) of the Black students and 19% (5,403) of the white students did not meet the reading standard. Fifty-nine percent (10,956) of the Black students and 29% (8,236) did not meet the math standard. Thirty-nine percent (7,139) of the Black students and 13% (3,628) of the white students did not meet the writing standard. Clearly, many of these students will have to make dramatic progress if they are going to pass the exit exam in 1988.

It is impossible to know how many students will fail the exit exam when it is first administered, or how many will never pass it. But as one teacher recently wrote me, there is reason for concern:

> I teach the seventh grade. Year after year I have in my classes numerous fourteen and fifteen year olds who

> do not do well in school and have not done well in school (sometimes NEVER have done well). These students are black and white, male and female. They are well on their way to dropping out; many are just passively waiting until they turn sixteen; others stay in trouble at school often enough that they are constantly suspended...The general public does not realize how many students there are in the real world of school (not the schools of 20 years ago) who, for an assortment of reasons, cannot pass the Exit Exam.

It is unclear how students who do not pass the exit exam will respond. Some may become motivated to work harder and take advantage of the remediation that will be provided to them. Others may choose to remain in school for as long at it takes--state law allows them to stay in school until they are 21 years old--to pass the exam and receive a high school diploma. Still others may become discouraged and simply drop out of school, particularly if they have previously been retained at grade level, or are significantly overage for their grade. By the time the Class of 1990 reaches the twelfth grade even more students than usual may have withdrawn from school.

Neither South Carolina, nor any other Southern state, can afford to lose fifteen thousand students, or more, from each graduating class. While dramatic progress has been made during the past two decades in getting students in school and keeping them there through the eighth grade, little progress has been made in reducing the numbers of students who leave school between the beginning of the ninth grade and the end of the twelfth grade. In South Carolina the Class of 1960 had 13,895 fewer students than when that class entered the ninth grade. The Class of 1979 had 17,591 fewer students than four years before. And the Class of 1986 lost 16,554 students between the ninth and twelfth

grades. When Secretary Bennett of the U.S. Department of Education recently released his "wall chart" of states' education statistics, seven Southern states were identified as having lost from 36 percent to 45 percent of their students between the ninth grade and graduation.

Even if recent education reforms eventually have an ameliorating effect on these statistics that does not relieve us of the responsibility to take immediate action for students who are currently in grades seven through twelve. If, for example, during the next six years in South Carolina dropouts, expulsions, and academic under achievement continue to account for the loss of 15,000 students from each graduating class, by 1992 there will be a total of at least 90,000 youth who are not adequately prepared to contribute to, or benefit from, the economic future of our state.

To understand the implications of this loss of human potential it is not necessary to depict an apocalyptic scenario of unemployment, dependency on Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, Medicaid and other cash transfer programs, though this will surely be the case for many of these youth. No, the issue is not whether these young people will find jobs. If the national economy is reasonably sound and if people keep moving to the South, neither of which can be assumed to be permanent conditions, in the near future there is likely to be an adequate supply of full-time and part-time minimum wage jobs, particularly in the service sector of the economy. The real tragedy will be that too many of these youth will join the ranks of the working poor. Their lives will be dominated by limited

options, unfulfilling work, and pressures which will put them and their families at risk. Throughout their lives they will be the people must vulnerable to the vagaries of the labor market. During times of economic recession, or depression, they will be the first to become dependent on government services, and to patronize the soup kitchens.

If the South is going to continue its economic growth it must be committed to fully developing the potential of every child. We cannot permit public school students to simply disappear, or to be rejected, with the assumption that they can cling to the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. Our region must determine to devote extraordinary attention to young people who, for whatever reason, are not mastering basic skills, who are isolated in and alienated from school, who lack the family support necessary to understand their options and to plan for their future, and whose motivation or behavior is not all we would like for it to be.

What can the states of our region do to address these problems?

First, we must be committed to educational reform not as an isolated event but as an on-going process. We must understand that like an athlete running the high hurdles, as soon as we have cleared one barrier we are faced with another obstacle. We cannot pause to catch our breath because other runners will pass us by.

There is only one way to finish this race: we must confront and clear each new hurdle. In practical terms this means having the intestinal fortitude to come to grips with problems we have

not addressed. It means continuing to take risks and to experiment. What must be done to enable the skills of school counselors to be used more effectively? What must be done so that at-risk youth are identified as early as the sixth grade, so their academic progress is closely monitored, and so they and their families receive the support necessary for the students to at least survive in school, and perhaps succeed there? What must be done to enable overage youth in grades 7-10 to have access to pre-employment and occupational training? What must be done so that as soon as dropouts withdraw from school they are immediately linked to second-chance education and training programs designed to meet their unique needs?

The second initiative Southern states can take is to marshall all their resources necessary to keep youth in school, and to help these youth benefit from the education and training that is made available to them. This is not a task that can be carried out by schools alone. Southern states will have to organize and mobilize diverse agencies so their resources can be effectively brought to bear on youth who need them the most. This will require governors and legislatures to use their powers to break down the barriers between schools and occupational training, social service, health, employment, vocational rehabilitation, alcohol and drug abuse, and youth service agencies. Encouraging, or forcing, this cooperation is difficult and it can only be achieved if state leaders are willing to use their powers towards this end. While there is now more crossing of boundaries, and cooperation, among these agencies than ever before there is potential for more to be done. State and local coordinating councils

councils can provide the forum for bringing these agencies together either to identify and solve broad policy issues attendant to better serving at-risk youth, or to deal with specific youth through an inter-agency process of case management.

Third, the South can supplement its commitment to compulsory attendance with a policy of compulsory development. Under this concept the State would require every young person up to the age of eighteen to be engaged in some clearly defined activity that would enhance his or her ability to become an independent and productive citizen. Graduating from high school and receiving a high school diploma would satisfy this requirement. But youth who withdraw from school, or who are forced out of school before graduating would have to be somewhere participating in a State-approved program of development--in an alternative education program, in a public or proprietary occupational training program, in an apprenticeship program, in a vocational rehabilitation program, in a service corps program, or in a juvenile institution. Any out-of-school youth under eighteen years old encountering a potential employer, law enforcement official, social worker, or a judge would be expected to produce evidence that he or she was enrolled in an approved program of development.

Fourth, every Southern state can mandate and assist public schools to develop the capacity to identify individual youth in grades 8-10 who are most likely to enter the labor market immediately after high school without adequate skills to seek and obtain employment. These youth could be targeted to

receive comprehensive employability development training jointly designed and provided by schools and appropriate state agencies. This training could either be incorporated into or supplement the students' regular curriculum. It might include coordinated basic skills instruction, intensive group counseling and career guidance, job search skills, orientation to and preparation for enrollment in high school vocational programs, etc. The primary objectives of this initiative would be to keep these youth in school, to effectively utilize the experience and services of appropriate state agencies, and to ensure that these youth are adequately prepared to successfully compete in the labor market.

Fifth, Southern states can initiate policies providing that by no later than the beginning of the tenth grade every public school student will be enrolled in a clearly defined curriculum sequence that is preparing them to enter either post-secondary education, the labor market, or the military after high school. At one or more points between grades ten and twelve students would be able to change their minds, but in any case they would be expected to declare the objective of their high school preparation, and their curricula would be developed consistent with that declaration. There would be flexibility in course selections, but <u>every</u> student would be expected to be preparing for either additional education, employment, or military service. Preparation, not just graduation, would be the purpose of high school. Without hesitating, <u>every</u> student could answer the question, "What are you planning to do after high school?"

Sixth, the South has a continuing obligation to give particular attention to encouraging Black youth to complete high

school and to obtain post-secondary education. Given the history of Black people in the South it is only right that the region do all that it can to enable Black youth to shape their own futures. But it is also in the South's economic self-interest to do so. Demographic studies indicate that the population of Black youth is increasing at a much greater rate than any other group. Assuming that most of these young people will choose to live in the South, the more education and skills they have the better off the South will be.

Just because the South is providing better education to more Black youth than ever before in its history, we must not assume an attitude of "we have done enough" or "it's up to them to take advantage of the opportunities." That is a short-sighted view. Instead, we need to do much more to get Black youth into post-secondary technical education programs, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities, and we need to provide these youth with the support and guidance necessary to keep them there until graduation. Encouraging Black youth to pursue post-secondary education is much easier if there is an adequate level of financial aid available from the Federal level. But the South cannot wait until the Federal government comes to its senses. We need to take affirmative steps of our own. The place to begin is in the seventh grade with an aggressive outreach campaign of counseling so that students and their parents begin to think about post-secondary education, and know how to plan for it. In addition, each year every public secondary school should set a target for the percentage of its ninth grade class it wants to

graduate four years later and enter a post-secondary educational institution. That target should be widely discussed and highly publicized, as should be the results. When a school meets its goal, and when a percentage of the school's graduates surviving their first year's attendance at post-secondary institutions meets a certain State standard, the school should receive an incentive award. These efforts need to be supplemented with increased State financial aid, and scholarships provided by businesses and community groups.

If the South is to better prepare its young people for the future we do not need more model programs or demonstrations which may benefit a relatively small number of youth but which are seldom replicated for the vast number of youth who need them. The best route to preparing the South's youth for self-sufficiency is through effective statewide policies and programs carried out by adequately supported, skilled, and caring professionals. We know this formula works. Some Southern states are already yielding positive results because these components were brought together in the states' respective education reform laws. Now we must assure continued funding, closely monitor results, and refine program components as may be necessary.

But knowing what works carries with it a special responsibility. We can no longer claim that "it can't be done." Critical needs can be documented, public support can be mobilized, political will can be developed, and revenue can be generated. Now we need to acknowledge the hurdles that stand before us. Now we need to initiate new policies and programs that will result in the education and training of young people who will either be this region's blessing or burden in the years ahead.